



## EXPEDITION DIARY Slovakia 2004

By Dom Hall

13 August

Though it seems a world away it is only four days since we bid our fond farewells to English newspapers, Big Brother (obviously we delayed our departure to catch the final) and the White Cliffs of Dover, which slipped away into a dreary English 'summer' sky. A further eight hours and five countries later we (and our trusty Land Rover) were in Stuttgart for an evening of much needed sleep before again hitting the road – destination Bratislava.

We arrived without event, save for a few curious faces - having picked up a second Land Rover in Germany, we now made a rather impressive sight as we made our various stops along the way. Two fully kitted up Land Rovers were enough to raise an eyebrow or two – one guy even had his photograph taken with them.

We spent an enjoyable evening wandering around the old town of Bratislava where beautiful 17<sup>th</sup> Century buildings are now springing to life again amidst the hustle and bustle of Slovakia's crème-de-lal-crème and holiday makers from the rest of Europe enjoying dinner or a beer in the many cafes.

The next day, after picking up some last minute supplies, we were on the road again and arrived at base to begin a frenzy of unpacking and sorting. Base is a beautiful lodge in the forest below the ridge, which will be our study site. The unpacking now complete, and enticing trips up to look at the study site (and enjoy the sunshine) we are now ready and raring to go, lacking only one thing – team members. Luckily tomorrow we head to Bratislava to meet them. They will be here on Sunday at which point things will really get under way. Watch this space...

15 - 16 August

Having met the team members (Jane already one set of luggage down thanks to airport inefficiencies) we headed off from Bratislava to once again brave the confused stares of passers-by; our Land Rovers which caused enough excitement alone now packed full of rucksacks and slightly dazed looking team members. We got a good early start out of Bratislava and were safely and uneventfully at base camp in time for a lovely spread prepared by Slavo (our scientist's) wife. Basking in glorious sunshine and enjoying their lunch - team members were happy in the knowledge that the "holiday" had begun.

So in order to dispel that myth we got straight on with the project with an intensive afternoon of training. After five hours at base camp the new team member's heads span with scientific information, wolf print sizes and shapes, Chamois urination techniques, GPS operation, map reading, distance estimation, taking bearings, using radios, digital cameras, spotting scopes and binoculars. By the end, given any item, they didn't know if they should press a button on it, look down it, use it to find their way, eat it or put it in a scat bag. The last of these confusions being potentially quite worrying we decided enough was enough for the day and it was time to enjoy some Slovak cuisine and sample a local lager or two before bed.

The next day was time to go over all that hard theory in practice so, after an hour or so of going over the data sheets we would be using, we headed out into the forest and onto the hills to start to put into practice all the things the team had learned. We were rewarded with a continuation of the glorious weather the team are becoming accustomed to (I can't help thinking the Slovak weather may have a surprise or two for them to come!). As a whole group we spent a very enjoyable day on the hill, with everyone becoming more comfortable with all the techniques they had been taught, ready to start out on the field work proper in the next few days. The biggest reward aside and ahead of the weather however were our first animal prints, with a number of red deer prints but more excitingly two very well defined bear prints - with a rear paw measurement of 24cm - suggesting a large male. We wondered if that explained what looked like very hurried red deer prints and looked forward to what the days to come would bring.

17 - 18 August

After a final morning of recap with the whole team together it was time to let the fledglings fly the nest for an afternoon in small groups to begin the science work proper. Three groups walked different trails, Katie showing a particular talent for bear scat collection though Lotte being the first to pick up an entire specimen! By the end of the afternoon the team had its first haul of seven bear scats - a pretty impressive start. On the return to the meeting point we were informed by radio that one of the teams would be a bit late back to the meeting point, but as the rest of us settled into relaxing, enjoying the sunshine and waiting for them I received a text message saying "had to double back to collect radio - will be there as soon as we can". Hardly an auspicious start and money began to fly as people placed bets as to who the most likely radio-leaving miscreant would be. Despite us trying the radio every few minutes (and doubtless scaring a number of passers by as they heard the now famous 'talking long grass of the Tatras') it was a good hour later that our questions were answered and a rather sheepish Alex confessed all. No harm done though and with the beginnings of a good tan to show for our extra long wait we headed down the hill with our bear scat haul.

The next day saw further adventures, this time navigationally motivated, as we all struggled to get to grips with the finer points of Slovakian map making and path marking. They have a very clearly thought out set of paths with large coloured lines marking the main trails - matched by coloured marks on trees. This you would think would make our lives easier, but not so when we are not always following the main tourist trails and even when we are, the lines on the map obscure all useful navigational features - and the marks on the trees are often themselves obscured by overgrown foliage. Anyway excuses aside we all covered a good amount of ground (even if some of it more than once!) and saw a good collection of prints and signs including wolf and bear prints (one really good set), a few trees and a telegraph pole damaged by bears and we returned with the obligatory brown envelopes of scat. Tomorrow it's up onto the ridges for some dawn and dusk observations.

19 - 21 August

Two packed days with mammoth walks for many of the team. We headed up on to the main ridge of the study area with the primary objective the observation of chamois activity at dawn and dusk. The team took different routes up to the ridge, checking for animal sign as they went up some pretty steep and exhausting terrain. The team were spilt between two alpine-style mountain huts where they met before heading out again in the late afternoon for some dusk observation positions. This meant more walking again as the teams split up all along the main ridge. It was a beautiful time to be in the mountains and a nice feeling to be heading out as most of the tourists were leaving the hills for the night. The serene dusky light which fell over the mountains was worth the walking alone, but on the science side also proved very fruitful. A number of groups of chamois were sighted across the length of the main ridge including one newborn and a number of yearlings. After two to three hours in their positions, the teams headed back to their respective huts to grab some food and then a few hours sleep before it was time to get up again for dawn observation. Even that sleep was interrupted by snoring in one hut and some sort of party in the other - we would get our own back when getting up at 3.50 in the morning to head out (though I hear the other team left at a very civilized 5.45!). Again long walks to reach observation positions were rewarded. Though on the East the mist meant that not a lot was seen, the team with me in the West were luckier with the cloud and were able to see a number of chamois groups; one of which we were able to observe for over an hour. We also found fresh wolf scat, which had not been on the path the night before. The team headed off exhausted but happy - everyone saw chamois and it feels like we've made some real progress. Back at base camp everyone was zombified and after a meal and a quick trip to the local bar to experience some local beer and traditional music ('experience' being the right word), everyone crashed out early. Today we are enjoying a day off to rest up and catch up all important washing and tidying! Everyone is recharging batteries and looking forward to next week.

22 August

Back to work today but the predicted poor weather has arrived with rain most of the day and strong winds. We therefore concentrated on the forest section of the study area and split into pairs to walk a variety of forest tracks to check for predator sign. Everyone had enjoyable walks but we saw limited sign - although between the whole group we had a collection of prints, scat and bear marked trees. But who needs sign when you can see the real thing - which is exactly what Alex and Bjorn managed today. When walking up one such forest track and joking about seeing a bear they noticed a rustling in the bushes and looked down to see what looked like a log begin to move before looking up at them - it was unclear who was more surprised, but Alex resorted to the training from the first days, made himself big, raised his arms and shouted "I'm bigger than you".

The somewhat confused bear took this advice at face value and fled into the bushes. "Anyone who can hear me - this is Alex", crackled the radio, "we've just seen a bear, not 20 metres away from us. I'm not joking".

It's brilliant that two of the team have been so lucky and everyone was green with envy but when one of the other pairs found clear bear prints of a paw measuring over 25cm (a big male), we decided maybe we'd seen the right bear today.

Tomorrow we head back up onto the main ridge in the hope of catching a good window in the weather for some chamois observation - fingers crossed.

23 - 26 August

The team split into two again to stay at two different mountain huts along the main ridge. One team with Slavo drove round to the north side to use the cable car up whilst the other others bounced their way up in the Land Rover with me. Both teams were in position by mid afternoon. The team with me enjoyed a few hours walk in different directions along the ridge and again found some sign of predators and had a very enjoyable evening walk before settling down to cook ourselves some much needed pasta to fuel up ready for the morning. However, the other team had considerably more luck in observing a number of chamois including one group of twelve individuals, which were observed over a period of time.

The next morning my team were up and away by 04.00 setting out into what looked promising conditions. As the light slowly started to come, so did the cloud, rolling in and slumping down onto the ridge, reducing visibility at times to 50 metres. We did manage one chamois sighting nonetheless and people pushed on in difficult conditions to walk along the main ridge and down various side ridges back to base camp. On the top of Skalka, Katie, Alex and I actually managed to get up above the cloud and had spectacular views above the cloud and out to the High Tatras mountains in the distance - it even made the 4 o'clock start worthwhile. On the other end of the ridge, the team had similar conditions but Kirk and Bjorn managed a good sighting and even got a spot of sunbathing in, as their northerly side ridge seemed to benefit from a micro climate all of its own.

The next day we were back in the forest zones again where the maze of forestry roads and walking trails made navigation pretty tricky - we had a full day 'exploring them'! Lotte and Jane in particular explored a very large area and we had an entertaining late afternoon trying to find each other before heading home just in time for dinner.

This morning we have been for our last walks, checking the tracks near base camp for predator sign. Now we are tidying and organising base camp, ready for our departure tomorrow back to Bratislava. The two weeks seem to have flown by and we have packed loads in. I feel it's been a very successful and enjoyable slot - I'll be sorry to see this team go. but look forward to two more action packed weeks to come.

29 - 30 Aug

The second slot is now in full swing. Having dropped the first team in Bratislava, I had a lazy day around town before meeting the next team - some of them in the evening for a pre-expedition feast in the city centre - and the whole team bright and early Sunday morning. They were piled unceremoniously into the Land Rover and Slavo's car and whisked back to base camp where the bombardment of information began. Safety procedures and an outline of the science work, as well as an overview of the expedition equipment were all crammed into the first day. The next morning we began with compasses, GPS, map reading as well as some more practical scientific information about how to fill in data sheets and collect samples.

Of course none of this could really begin to sink in until we got out in the field, so in the afternoon we headed out into the forest to put all the hard learnt theory into practice. The team were rewarded with their first bear scats and a collection of red deer tracks and scats. The training is progressing well, tomorrow the team will get a few hours alone in pairs to try out their new-found skills - then the science begins for real.

31 Aug - 1 Sep (white rabbits, white rabbits)

The team's first day proper in the field was celebrated with some pretty grotty weather with rain all morning, heavy at times. Therefore we spent just a few hours out in the field - first together as a whole group for a final recap of techniques and then off in smaller groups. In spite of the inclement weather, a number of samples were collected but all the groups were back at base camp by mid afternoon. Undeterred the team moved on to animal study of a different kind - balloon animals to be precise - the explanation being that it was Claire's 18th birthday. I still feel that the enormous bear scat she got to pick up in the morning was celebration enough - after all how many people can say they picked up a bear poo on their 18th. However, the team felt further celebration was in order and there was cake and balloon chamois, wolves and bears to study. The highlight was undoubtedly Petra's determined effort of a three balloon challenge - three balloons, one inside the other. When she was eventually successful Alex was left only with a disbelieving face and, shaking his head, he went off to consider the marvels of the universe and reassess his overall understanding of it. After dinner and yet another birthday dessert we all headed to the bar to toast Claire's health and, for reasons I can't remember - to discuss Morris dancing at great length. The following day saw the return of better weather and thus to normal scientific collection. Large areas of the south side of the main ridge were surveyed picking off a number of the last remaining side ridges. As well as good scat collections, the wet weather improved tracking possibilities and wolf, bear and possibly lynx prints were all recorded. There were also a couple of pine martin sightings. All goes well and, if the weather holds, the main ridge and chamois observation may beckon tomorrow.

2 - 4 Sep

The forecast promised fine weather for the next few days, so we decided on a three day stint up on the main ridge to concentrate on chamois observation. Four of the team travelled round to the north side of the ridge and used the cable car access to reach the hut at Chopok whilst the rest came with me in the Land Rover up to the hut on the western end of the ridge. Both teams reached their bases by midday and headed out for afternoon walks or observations. On the west side no chamois were seen, but a number of predator signs were recorded again suggesting that this section of the ridge is used regularly by wolves. On the east edge a number of chamois sightings were made and observations recorded - late afternoon and evening seems to be proving very successful especially on the east end where, as the tourists begin to disappear into the huts or head home, the chamois move up onto the main ridge. They are again observed early in the mornings before heading down into the cliffs on the north side.

The team with me in the west, encouraged by the predator sign, decided to try a night observation and so, fortified by much needed lentil soup at the hut, we spent about three hours heading up, watching the ridge and heading back down to bed. No animals were seen, but everyone enjoyed the opportunity to have a go with the night sight equipment as well as it being a beautiful moonlit night and a great time to be out in the mountains. Anyway I think we got as much sleep as the team in the other hut who had horror stories of late night guitar action in their hut!

The next day was to be our main observation day and so, split into pairs, we spread out across the entire ridge. Most of my team decided to cross the ridge and spend the night at the Chopok hut which gave me the chance to see the eastern end of the ridge for the first time. The ridge towards the main peaks of Chopok and Dumbier in the east becomes rockier and more mountainous and dramatic, which made the crossing of the ridge a very enjoyable walk. Along the way we took up various observation posts and scanned the cliffs for chamois activity. A number of groups were observed as well as one team hearing wolf howls down in the valley, and all the teams seeing a huge golden eagle flying along the ridge. This was a personal highlight for me; read as you might of the size of golden eagles it doesn't prepare you for the thing flying just 20m over your head - these are colossal birds! It was especially interesting as Anya and I were able to observe a chamois seeing the eagle and nervously and hurriedly crossing the slope beneath it to take shelter in the cliffs. This was our first chance to see interaction between chamois and other animals and was of great interest to Slavo, as one of the foci of his science work.

All the teams were at Chopok after a full eight or nine hours on the mountainside for a much needed meal. We just about mustered the energy for the ten minute climb up to the summit of Chopok to watch the sun setting before forcing ourselves across the 9 o'clock boundary of respectability before tumbling gratefully into bed. The following day we split again and took various routes back across the ridge, or down various side ridges to the north and south back to base. Another long day for most people with some more successful chamois observation - Slavo actually saying it was his best day yet, observing a number of chamois at close quarters. Back now to civilisation, showers and a day off to hopefully enjoy the continued sunshine and do some much needed laundry.

5 - 9 September

The day off raced by as days off always do, but people were refreshed, clean and ready to go again the next day - which was just as well because the fine weather continued to hold and so we headed again back up to the main ridge. This time the whole team concentrated on the western end of the ridge where previously we had seen very few chamois. Our theory was that this end of the ridge had only been observed so far by teams who were on their way to other areas - so the whole team headed up to the western hut for some extended observation sessions. Sure enough (though a number of teams spent three to four hours watching very empty valleys) we were rewarded by sighting a group of thirteen, which were observed throughout the afternoon as well as a lone male. Even the groups who had seen nothing were at least able to enjoy a spectacular sunset before heading back for the now legendary hut bean soup.

The next day four of the team made the crossing to Chopok for observations there whilst the remainder of the team again concentrated on extended observation of the western area. Again good chamois observations were recorded and we began to build up a good picture of the main groups along the whole length of the ridge. We also saw golden eagles again and a number of other raptors.

The sun rose the next day to, well barely any effect actually, as the ridge had misted in heavily overnight. About half of the team decided to brave the conditions and walk down anyway whilst the others opted for the Land Rover or chair lift. Walking, however, turned out to be a good gamble as only a few hundred metres of descent and the seemingly impenetrable mist gave way to sunshine and very pleasant walking conditions. Though only covering the tops of the ridge, the fog seems to have heralded a change in the weather. Today, our last day of the expedition seems almost autumnal with a strong and bitterly cold wind chilling everyone despite bright skies and sunshine. We've had a final day of collecting scats and prints in the forest zone before getting wholeheartedly stuck into packing base camp neatly into the back of the Land Rover. For the team I know the two weeks have raced by and for me I can barely believe I left England over five weeks ago. It has been an excellent expedition with some very good results - thank you to everyone who made it happen. Too many to mention, but you know who you are. We look forward to future years working with Slavo out in Slovakia, to more chamois observation and most importantly to more little brown envelopes of scat...

STOP PRESS - OK I have been caught out - I was back before two of the other teams. The last teams have just come into the room where I had proudly put the finishing touches to the diary, assuming that nothing else diary-worthy would happen - how wrong could I be - some huge bear prints - 30 cm long would have been almost worth the stop press in their own right but it barely justifies mention when John reported seeing not one, but TWO bears - a mother and baby rustling off into the bushes. It is hardly worth saying that everyone was incredibly jealous - but no one so much so as Nadine - his partner on today's walk who at the key moment of the bear sighting was further back down the trail answering the call of nature - never before has a call of nature so interfered with a sighting of nature - the irony was not lost on her.

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A copy of this diary is also at [www.biosphere-expeditions.org/diaries](http://www.biosphere-expeditions.org/diaries)